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**Top 10 Important Events in British History: The First World War**



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Introduction

At the start of the twentieth century Britain was still the greatest world power. But by the middle of the century Britain was clearly weaker than the United States or the Soviet Union. De the end of the seventies Britain was no longer the a world power at all and wasn’t even among the richest European powers.

One reason for this sudden decline was the cost and effort of two world wars. Another great problem was the cost of keeping up the Empire, followed by the economic problems involved in losing it. But the most important reason was the basic weakness in Britain’s industrial power. Particularly Britain refused to spend as much as other industrial nations in developing its industry.

At the end of the century Britain has lost much of its earlier self-confidence. But there are so many opinions about the reasons of that situation. Some people think that the workforce was lazy, or that the trade unions were too powerful, or there were not enough educated and clever managers. Others blame the immigrants who have settled in Britain from the old colonies since the Second World War.

A nation’s story shouldn’t include issues just about wealth or power, but about the quality of the community’s existence. So Britain’s loss of power need not damage that quality, unless it is measured only in material terms.

The First World War: How it was …

Germany nearly defeated Britain and France in the first few weeks of war in 1914. It had better trained soldiers, better equipment and clear plans of attack. The French and the British armies were fortunate to hold back the German army at the River Marne, deep inside France. The battle lasted for four years. Both armies were living and fighting in the trenches, which they had to dig to protect their men.



***The First World War: How British lived in trenches***

This was Britain’s first European war for the century and that’s why the country was quite unprepared for the terrible destructive power of modern weapons. First people who joined thy army were volunteers. But in 1916 the government forced men to join the army whether they wanted to or not. A few men refused to fight. For example, “Quakers” (members of the Religious Society of Friends, a Christian movement founded by George Fox circa 1650 and devoted to peaceful principles) believed fighting to be wrong. The government accepted this idea, but the war went on and the number of deaths increased day by day. On the 1-st of July 1916 Britain attacked German positions on the River Somme. By the evening it had lost 20 000 dead and 40 000 wounded. During five months of fighting from the 1-st of July 1916 cost Britain 400 000, France 200 000 and Germany 500 000 dead and wounded. The next year at Passchendaele the British army advanced five miles at the cost of another 400 000 dead and wounded. The nature of war was completely changed by modern artillery and machine guns. The invention of the tanks and their use on the battlefield in 1917 could have changed the course of the war. It could have led to fewer casualties if its military value had been properly understood at that period of time.



***The First World War: Wounded British in trenches***

In the Middle East the British fought against Turkish troops in Iraq and Palestine. There were also many casualties, but many of them were caused by sickness and heat. Only in 1917 the British were really able to drive back the Turks.

Somehow the government had to persuade the people that the war was still worth fighting in spite of such terrible results. The nation was told that it was defending the weak Belgium against the strong Germany and that this fighting was for democracy and freedom.

At the same time popular newspapers encouraged the nation to hate Germany and to want Germany’s destruction. France had been badly defeated by Germany in 1871, that’s why national feelings in France were even stronger than in Britain. As a result, when Germany suggested making peace at the end of 1916, both the British and the French government didn’t welcome the idea. They were prisoners of the public feelings that they had helped to create.

The war at the sea was more important than the war on land, because defeat at sea would have resulted in British surrender. From 1915 German submarines started sinking merchant ships bringing supplies to Britain. At the battle of Jutland in 1916 Admiral Jellicoe successfully drove the German fleet back into harbor. If Germany’s navy had destroyed the British fleet at Jutland, Germany would have gained control of the seas around Britain, forcing Britain to surrender. In spite of this partial victory Germany submarines managed to sink 40 per cent of Britain’s merchant fleet and at one point brought Britain to six weeks of starvation. When Russia following the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, made peace with Germany, the German generals hoped for victory against the Allies. But German submarine attacks on neutral shipping drew America into the war against Germany. The arrival of American troops in France ended Germany’s hopes, and it surrendered in November 1918.

By this time Britain had an army of over five million men, but by this time over 750 000 had died and another two millions had been seriously wounded. About fifty times more people had died than in the twenty-year war against Napoleon. Public opinion demanded no mercy for Germany.

In this atmosphere France and Britain met to discuss peace at Versailles in 1919. Germany wasn’t invited to the conference, but was forced to accept its severe punishment. John Maynard Keynes, the most famous British economist of the time, argued that it was foolish to punish the Germans, because Europe’s economic and politic recovery couldn’t take place without them. But his advice wasn’t accepted.

Certainly apart from hatred of Germany there was great sorrow for the dead. The destruction had been terrible! Wives had lost their husbands, children had lost their fathers, parents had lost their sons. It was difficult for a nation in these circumstances to persuade itself that the war somehow worth it.

There was also anger about the stupidity of war. The poems written by young poet soldiers influenced public opinion that the war had been an act against God and man.

When the peace came there were great hopes for a better future. These promises had been created by the government itself, which had made too many promises about improved conditions of life for soldiers returning from the war. As soon as the war had ended, the government started a big programme of building homes and improving health and education. But the progress wasn’t as great as people had hoped.

The rise of the Labour Party

An important political development during the war was the rapid growth of the Labour Party. It was formally established in 1900, but its beginning dated from 1874 as a part of the trade union movement. The trade unions had grown enormously from two million members to five million by 1914 and eight million by 1918. That year was significant because all men aged twenty-one and some women over thirty were allowed to vote. So the number of voters doubled from eight to sixteen million people and most of them belonged to the working class.



***The sixth Annual Conference of the Labour Party, February 1906***

As a result of these changes the Labour Party which had won 29 seats in the 1906 election, won 57 seats in 1918, 142 seats in 1922 and 191 seats in 1923. The first Labour government was created the following year. However, the Labour Party wasn’t “socialist”. Its leaders had become members of the middle classes. They wanted to develop a kind of socialism that would fit the situation in Britain. This was partly because Labour’s leaders didn’t wish to frighten the voters. It was also because middle-class thinkers before the war had completely failed to interest the working class in socialist ideas. In fact Karl Marx, who spent most of his life in Britain studying and writing, was almost unknown except to a few friends. He and his close friend Friedrich Engels had little hope of the British working classes becoming truly socialist. In 1885 Engels had written: “The fools want to reform society to suit themselves, but not reform themselves to suit the development of society”. Most working-class people wished to improve their financial situation and to enjoy the advantages of the middle-class without involving in social beliefs. The trade unions and the Labour movement had been shaped by the experiences of the 19-th century. They didn’t believe they could bring down the existing form of government and they wanted to change things by accepted constitutional means in Parliament. This was partly because they were supported not only by working class but also by radicals in Parliament.

Also the effect on Britain of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia wasn’t as great as many thought and feared. Many people were interested in Marxism to establish a Communist Party, but the Labour Party firmly refused to be connected with it.

As a result of Labour’s success in 1924, the Liberal Party almost completely disappeared. Liberals joined the Conservative Party, while most Liberal “reformers” joined the Labour Party.

The rights of women

In 1918 some women over the age of thirty gained the right to vote after a long and hard struggle. The industrial revolution had increased the power of men and their feelings about property. A man thought of his wife and daughters as his property and so did the law. It was almost impossible for women to get a divorce, for rich ones to pay enough the legal cost. Until 1882 a woman had to give all her property to her husband when she marry him. And until 1891 husbands were still allowed by law to beat their wives with a stick and to lock them up in a room if they wished. By 1850 wife beating had become a serious social problem in Britain. Men of all classes were able to take sexual advantage of working women. Women in Britain were probably treated worse than in any other industrializing European country at this time.

After 1870 the situation began to improve. Women were allowed to vote and to be elected to borough or to county councils. A very small number started studying at Oxford and Cambridge in separate women’s colleges, but they couldn’t receive a degree as men did. Middle-class women became increasingly determined to have equal rights.

Working-class women were more interested in their legal rights concerning working conditions and they found support in the trade union movement. In 1888 the demand was that “where women do the same work as men, they should receive equal pay”. Some time had passed and this principle became law. Female membership of the unions increased but it wasn’t always easy to persuade working men to respect the equal rights of their wives, particularly in times of unemployment.

In 1897 women started demanding the right to vote in national elections. Within ten years they had become famous for the extreme methods they were using. These women were called “saffragettes”. Many politicians were shocked by their violent methods and stopped supporting them. But if they hadn’t been willing to shock the public the “saffragettes” might not have succeeded.



***English Suffragettes Storm Parliament in February 1907***

The war in 1914 changed everything. Britain wouldn’t have been able to continue the war without the women. They took men’s places in the factories and by 1918 about 29 per cent of the total workforce of Britain was female. Women had to be given the vote.

The liberation of women took other forms. They started wearing lighter clothing, shorter hair and skirts, began smoking and drinking openly, using cosmetics. Married women wanted smaller families and they could divorce. Surely many men also moved away from Victorian values. Lots of leading writers freely discussed sexual and other sensitive matters, which would have been impossible for earlier generations.

Since women could vote many people felt full and equal rights. But there was still a long battle ahead for equal treatment and respect both at home and at work. The struggle for full women’s right is one of the most important events in British social history and the First World War strongly influenced on its development.

Ireland in the First World War

Before the beginning of the First World War the British government had agreed to home rule for Ireland. But the government was also afraid that the Protestants would start a civil war in Ulster (Northern Ireland nowadays) if home rule was introduced. For this reason when the war began in 1914 home rule was delayed. The British government called on Irishmen to join the army. Many thousands did it by the influence of their members of Parliament. MP’s hoped that this show of loyalty would help Ireland win self-government when the war ended.

There was another group of Irishmen however who didn’t want to die for the British. They didn’t only want home rule but full independence. At Easter 1916 these republicans rebelled in Dublin. They knew that they couldn’t win but they hoped their rising would persuade other Irishmen to join the republican movement. The “Easter Rising” was quickly put down and disapproved by most Irish. But the British executed all the leaders, which was a serious mistake. The public was shocked both in Ireland and in London.



***The Easter Rising in Dublin, 1916***

In the 1918 elections the republicans won in almost every area except Ulster. Instead of joining the British Parliament they met in their own new parliament in Dublin. They announced that Ireland was now a republic. Irishmen joined the republic’s army and guerrilla fighting against the British began. As a result the British government decided to make peace. The southern Ireland became independent in 1921. But Ulster (Northern Ireland nowadays) remained united with Britain.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 led to civil war between the Irish themselves. Be this treaty the new “Irish Free State” accepted continued British use of certain ports, the sovereignty of the British Crown, and the most important – the loss of Northern Ireland, which remained under British control. The republicans, who insisted that all Ireland including Northern Ireland should be an independent republic, were defeated. But the group of republicans formed a new party, Fianna Fail, which won the election of 1932 and the new Prime Minister began to undo the Treaty and in 1937 declared southern Ireland a republic. The British Crown was no longer sovereign in Ireland.

The results: disappointment and depression

The men who had fought in such terrible conditions during the war had been promised a land “fit for heroes”. But this promise wasn’t easy to keep even by the popular new Labour Party. The cost of the war had led to an enormous increase in taxation. The demands of the war had also led to a doubling in the size of the civil service and greater government control of national life. The disagreement between workers and the government was increasing. Before the war in 1914 there had been an outbreak of strikes. Immediately after the war there were further serious strikes, and in 1919 and 1921 soldiers were used to break these strikes and force men back to work.

In 1926 discontent led to a general strike by all workers. The reasons for the strike were complicated but the immediate cause was a coalminers’ strike. Fearing that this would seriously damage the economy the government made plans to make sure of continued coal supplies. Both sides, the government and the Trades Union Congress (representing the miners in this case), found themselves unwillingly driven into opposing positions. So the general strike was inevitable.



***The general strike in Great Britain, 1926***

The general strike ended after nine days, partly because members of the middle-class worked to keep services like transport, gas and electricity going. Also many union leaders feared the dangers both to their workers and the country of “going to far”. The miners struggled on alone and soon they gave up the strike. Many workers believed that the police was actually fighting against them. Many people remembered the general strike with great bitterness. These memories influenced their opinion of employers, government and the police for half a century.

It is possible to argue that Britain missed an opportunity to reform the economic structure of the country after the war. But instead of careful planning, businessmen were allowed to make quick profits particularly in the cotton mills, the shipyards and engineering industries. But perhaps it was little the government could do to control the situation, as it wasn’t in control of economic forces. All over Europe and America a serious economic crisis was taking place. It was called “the depression”. It affected Britain most severely from 1930 to 1933 when over three million workers were unemployed.



***Unemployed people in front of a workhouse in London, 1930***

In Germany the depression was even more severe and it destroyed Britain’s second most important market from before the war. Far worse the economic collapse of Germany led to the rise of Adolf Hitler. The government didn’t take the situation seriously enough because the worst effects of the depression in Britain were limited to certain areas. The most affected areas by the depression were those which had created Britain’s industrial revolution, including Clydeside, Belfast, the industrial north of England and southeast Wales. The working-class still lived in poor conditions in these areas. There was little hope for these people because almost no one was willing to invest the large amounts of money needed to get industry working again. The Labour Party wasn’t better at dealing with the situation than the Conservatives.

Conclusion

It is surprising that Britain avoided a serious political crisis in the 1920s. The unfairness of the situation was so obvious to working-class people who hadn’t political and economic power. In other European countries economic crisis and social unrest had led to great changes. In Russia there had been the Bolshevik revolution. Powerful Fascist governments were taking over in Germany, Italy, Austria and Spain. France also faced political crisis. Britain’s reasonably calm political life was proof of an astonishing level of popular agreement about the basis of government which didn’t seem to exist in many parts of Europe.

In the 1930s the British economy started to recover, especially in the Midlands and the south. This could be seen in the enormous number of small houses, which were being built along main roads far into the countryside.

This new kind of development depended on Britain’s growing motor industry, which was based in the Midlands. In the 19-th century towns were full of new houses near the railway. And the countries around the towns changed as many new houses were built along main roads suitable for motoring. Middle-class people moved out further to quieter new suburbs. Each of it had its own shops and a cinema. Unplanned suburbs grew especially quickly around London where the underground railway system had spread out into the country.

Economic recovery resulted partly from the danger of another war. By 1935 it was clear that Germany under Adolf Hitler was preparing to regain its position in Europe. Britain had done nothing to increase its fighting strength since 1918 because public opinion in Britain had been against war. The government suddenly had to rebuild its armed forces and this meant investing a large amount of money in heavy industry. By 1937 British industry was producing weapons, aircraft and equipment for war, with the help of money from the United States.

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